

Very Rev. J. A. M. Pelamourgues, V. G

J. F. Kempker

ISSN 0003-4827

Material in the public domain. No restrictions on use.



This work has been identified with a [Creative Commons Public Domain Mark 1.0](#).

Recommended Citation

Kempker, J. F. "Very Rev. J. A. M. Pelamourgues, V. G." *The Annals of Iowa* 6 (1903), 115-121.

Available at: <https://doi.org/10.17077/0003-4827.4554>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)



VERY REV. J. A. M. PELAMOURGUES,
Missionary priest and educator. Distinguished
in the annals of the Roman Catholic
Church of early Iowa.

VERY REV. J. A. M. PELAMOURGUES, V. G.

BY REV. J. F. KEMPKER.

This name is inseparably associated with the early Catholicity of Iowa, and especially with the place which bears the name of his patron—St. Anthony's church, Davenport, Iowa—and whose beginning forms a part of our hero's life history.

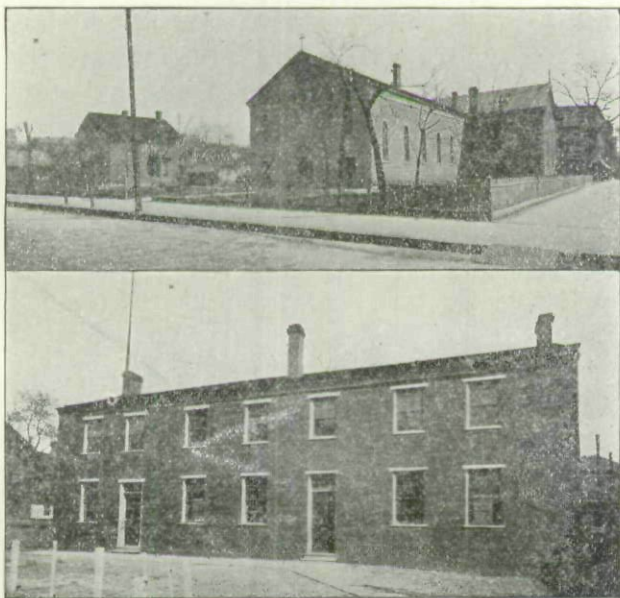
An old and very interesting landmark of that promising city is the church organization formed with the beginning of the town on the sacred place which was named on the old city plat, "Church Square." This is St. Anthony's church, the oldest congregation in that part of the country, for which the building was constructed of the first brick manufactured there. It is spoken of everywhere in the State in the narrations of pioneer lore, and there is a hallowed charm in the contemplation of this old church square.

The site was secured through the efforts of Very Rev. Samuel Mazzuchelli, together with several early catholic settlers, and now lies in the heart of the city. Father Mazzuchelli resided in Dubuque in 1835, and occasionally celebrated Holy Mass and administered the sacraments in Davenport and Fort Stephenson (Rock Island). In 1838 he worked out plans for a building, to be about twenty-five by forty feet, two stories high and of brick, to serve the purpose of church, school and residence. Antoine and Margaret Le Claire, to whom the catholics of Davenport owe a lasting debt of gratitude, took a leading part in the pious enterprise.

On the 27th of April, 1838, ground was broken for the new church, which was built according to specifications. Having been completed in 1839, on the twenty-third day of May, the same year, Rt. Rev. Bishop Matthias Loras, assisted by the Very Rev. S. Mazzuchelli, dedicated the new edifice for its future career of grace and blessing. The faithful members surrounded their amiable prelate beseeching him to

send them a resident pastor; to whose petitions the bishop acceded. Subsequently Father Pelamourgues was appointed, arriving in the latter part of August, 1839, to enter upon his charge. He had but just returned to Dubuque, on the Mississippi, from Minnesota, whither he was delegated on a missionary visit.

He was a native of France, where he had been ordained to the priesthood and had accepted a prominent place in a body of young missionaries. Bishop Loras, on his visit to France in 1838, won him for his American missions, and a company



ST. ANTHONY'S SCHOOL.

comprising Bishop M. Loras, Father J. Cretin, Abbe Anthony Pelamourgues, and the four students, Augustin Ravoux, Lucien Galtier, J. Causse, and R. Petiot, set sail for our shore. They arrived in New York harbor in October with grateful hearts; the sea had been so rough that all, including

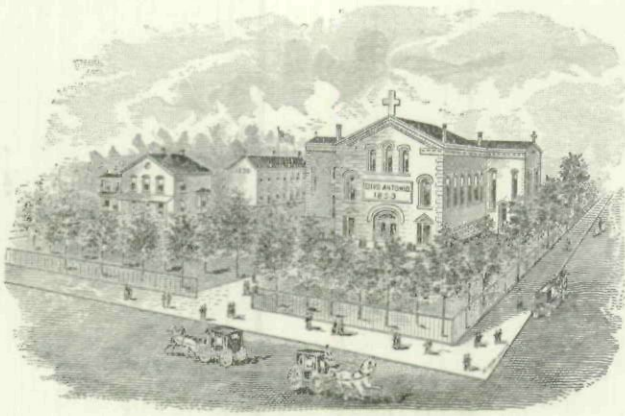
even the captain, despaired of ever living through it. The priests attributed their safe arrival in port to the intercession of St. Cessianus, whose body the Bishop carried with him. On his departure from Rome in June, Pope Gregory XVI had given to Bishop Loras the relics of St. Cessianus, which he translated to his see in Dubuque, and during the voyage they celebrated mass several times upon an altar over these relics, praying for a safe passage.

On their arrival the band separated, leaving Father Pelamourgues in the seminary at Baltimore, to pursue the study of English, while his associates became weather-bound in St. Louis, where they spent the winter in preaching missions and performing spiritual duties. In early spring they united in St. Louis, were joined by Very Rev. Samuel Mazzuchelli from Dubuque, and all took passage on the first steamboat of the season up the Mississippi. They landed at Dubuque on Friday, April 19, 1839, amid tremendous excitement and an overwhelming welcome from the entire population. On Sunday, April 21st, Bishop Matthias Loras was solemnly installed in his cathedral, assisted by the entire clergy above named.

All the traditions and written passages of those days indicate the saintly character of our hero, for Father Pelamourgues was a priest of remarkable zeal and piety.

In entering on his duties as pastor of Davenport he took up his quarters in the new building, a useful enough structure for the times, and immediately commenced to identify himself with the spiritual interests of his people, not neglecting to give fatherly and well considered advice in temporal matters wherever opportunity afforded. The prosperity of his people as well as of the entire city, awakened his interest and sympathy. He soon proved himself to be a competent and sound adviser on all subjects which promoted their well being, and his opinions gained high regard among all classes. He was assiduous and untiring in the preaching of the gospel and imparting instructions of the faith. The

poor he loved and visited the sick in their afflictions, bringing consolation and assistance with more than empty words. He personally conducted the first school in Davenport, which was kept in the church building as a parochial school, and he continued for many years to be the school teacher. He not only assisted, but took a leading part in the public meetings of the town, for which his school rooms were always open when the interests of the community called for them. While his school became noted as an institute of education, and people began to look up to him as a city father, his silvery primitive bell voiced the town signals. In the warnings of fire or danger, as well as the calls for duty or festi-



ST. ANTHONY'S CHURCH AND PARSONAGE.

vals, Father Pelamourgues himself was often the first to sound the peals from his well known bell. His shepherd's voice and good example contributed to the record of Davenport's beginning.

During his pastorate, hard years and many embarrassments were the lot of early settlers, amid which, however, he continued onward in the even tenor of his way. In 1852 the time had arrived when he could carry out his favored project of erecting a new church of stone for his increasing

flock; the building which is used at present in the improved restoration. But being called to France at this time, Rev. G. H. Plathe was appointed in his place, and it was this most worthy, pious, zealous and talented priest who superintended the construction of the church. In July, 1853, Father Pelamourgues returned to his home in Davenport, and succeeded in completing and using the church at the close of the same year.

In the development of the parish, Father Pelamourgues was very effective in gaining means and teachers for his schools. In 1846 he had some Sisters of Charity, B. V. M., of Dubuque, established in Davenport, who, among many vicissitudes and with his aid, finally established the Sisters' Parochial School successfully and on a firm foundation, and opened the academy of the Immaculate Conception which has since become famous as an institution of the highest culture for young ladies.

In his official capacity as vicar general of the diocese of Dubuque, he was several times connected with important undertakings, and used such care and zeal as the high office required. He was honored with the confidence and trust of his superiors and fellow-priests which was often manifested in seeking his advice, and intrusting to him delicate and important missions of diocesan administration.

Father Pelamourgues was at first the only priest in a large territory, and for many years attended other places as out-missions, among which may be named Muscatine, Iowa City, Burlington, Columbus Junction, DeWitt and Lyons. Traveling was in those days very trying. The hard work and the dangers of the way were frequently forgotten in the joy and consolation which the priest was able to bring to the distant members of his scattered flock. Results would force a smile even in disappointment.

Father Pelamourgues advocated the liberal use of holy water. His small mission in Burlington seemed to appreciate this, for he blessed a goodly supply and yet it was all

taken; at this the good abbe was edified, until one of the parishioners informed him that the non-catholics in the heated summer mistook his holy water for drinking water. The next time Father Pelamourgues added more salt, and the holy water was found less palatable.

Bishop Loras estimated that there were about 30,000 Indians in his diocese and was exceedingly anxious for their conversion. In apportioning missionary work among them, he gave to Father Ravoux the Sioux, Father Cretin the Winnebago, Father Mazzuchelli the Wisconsin tribes, and to Father Pelamourgues the Sacs and Foxes. Father Pelamourgues could do little with them; but once while visiting his flock in Burlington, he was told of a moribund Indian out in Agency City. He immediately journeyed thither to assist the dying, but at the Agency was halted by the guard on duty, who informed him that he could not enter the reservation on pain of imprisonment. Like St. Peter and St. John, Father Pelamourgues thought that in the line of duty he should listen to God rather than to man and went onward to seek the dying man. He was made a prisoner under guard until the return of General Street, who had been called away for two or three days, and thus Father Pelamourgues suffered imprisonment for the faith.

Among the high honors accorded Father Pelamourgues was the appointment to a bishopric by Pope Pius IX. In 1850 St. Paul was established as a diocese, and the appointment as first bishop of the new diocese was sent to Father Pelamourgues. He, however, refused to accept the high honor, and in his declination sent to Rome such reasons as were sanctioned by the Holy Father, and our hero remained the humble parish priest, through his own choice and self-abnegation.

However, his fond attachment for Davenport is well known and he entertained the hope that some day the distinction would be given it which came in 1881 when it was made an episcopal see.

A magnificent tribute was paid Father Pelamourgues by his life-long friend and associate, Very Rev. Philip Laurent, the most deserving, saintly and scholarly pastor of Muscatine, who was honored in completing the fiftieth year of his priesthood and pastorate in his charming home city, and who, since then, was called to his reward December 2, 1902.

At the head of early catholic educational institutions in Iowa stands Father J. A. M. Pelamourgues' school, the first of any kind in Davenport. There were no public schools organized when Father Pelamourgues, most simple, self-denying, apostolic man, devoted himself to the hard task of teaching, and opened a school in the old brick church, built by Father Mazzuchelli, which still stands behind St. Anthony's church. This building answered for church, school, and pastoral residence. The apartments of the priest-schoolmaster were a corner of the gallery partitioned off by rough boards. The choir, to which belonged Judge Mitchell, Antoine Le Claire, Joseph Motie, Joseph Clarke, Miss Rose Clarke, Mrs. Lou Hebert, Mary Finch and others, was taught by the Father. There were no organs and no melodeons in those days, but they had flute, clarionet, cello and violin, and made the best music in the State. Under the gallery in the body of the church, school was taught by the priest, a curtain veiling the sanctuary. Judge Dillon, now of New York City, one of the best known legal authorities of the two continents, was a pupil in Father Pelamourgues' school in the earliest days.

In 1845 some B. V. M. Sisters came to Davenport, but times were too hard and they left at the end of the year. In 1855 they came back and organized their famous academy. In 1868, after having kept his school all those intervening years without flagging or becoming tired, Father Pelamourgues went to his native Rodez for a visit. His intention was to come back to Davenport, from which his heart could not be wrenched. All his letters from his Aveyron home were breathing the greatest love for scholars and for Davenport; circumstances prevented his return, and he died an exile, strange to say, in his native country. He has not been forgotten here, however, and his name is still a household word in Davenport.

Father Pelamourgues remained in Davenport as pastor until 1868, when he resigned and returned to his native France, where the Lord called him to his reward in the maturity of years, in 1875. He was universally esteemed by all as a man full of merit, strong in character, loyal to duty and a benefactor of mankind.

Copyright of *Annals of Iowa* is the property of State of Iowa, by & through the State Historical Society of Iowa and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.